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Sources of Conflict in the Middle East

The Kurds

by

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Opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Iraqi Kurdish leadership.

In all, the Kurds comprise a population of some twenty-five to thirty million, a sizable number by any measure. They are the Middle East's fourth largest ethnic/linguistic group, after the Arabs, the Turks and the Persians. They are a people of unfulfilled national aspirations; they have found their language and culture suppressed, their identity denied and even their physical existence threatened.

It is an irony that whenever the Kurdish national issue is addressed, the security concerns of their neighbors are invoked. Looking back at the suffering the Kurds had to endure in past decades, one wonders whose security concerns are more profound and more relevant.

Today, the main concern for the Kurds is the fear that the logic of the old regional order will prevail once again when reshaping the politics of the region. It is a profound concern shared many Kurds that their rights and aspirations, and their security concerns, will once again be ignored and subordinated to a notion of stability formulated primarily from the perspective of regional capitals.

The conflicts that have engulfed the Kurdish homeland in recent years find their roots in the post World War I period: The defeat of the Ottoman empire in 1918 and the allied division of the Ottoman lands afforded the Kurds a fleeting opportunity to gain independence. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, given to the world on January 8, 1918, promised an era of self-determination for all subject peoples. Wilson's twelfth point addressed itself specifically to the nationalities under Ottoman rule. They should be assured, it announced, of "an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development." On November 8, three days before the war's end, the British and French governments issued a statement assuring that their aim was "...the establishment of

national Governments and Administrations drawing their authority from the initiative and free choice of indigenous populations."¹

The British, who were the major military power in the Middle East when the war came to its close, at first envisaged the creation of an independent Kurdish state or a series of independent or semi-independent Kurdish principalities. The allied powers initially promised a regime of "local autonomy" for the Kurdish inhabited regions, with the option for independence within six months. But these promises were later abandoned and ignored. The plight of the Kurds under the order that emerged in the aftermath of 1st World War, was summarized by the human rights organization, Helsinki Watch, to have been "a staggering list of human rights abuses, arrest, torture, murder, assassination, chemical warfare, mass deportations, expulsions, appalling conditions in refugee camps, denial ethnic rights to language, literature and music, and destruction of villages and towns."

As a consequence of this state of affairs, resistance and conflict have been predominant features of contemporary Kurdish history. Aside from its moral and human rights dimensions, the Kurdish issue constituted a major destabilizing factor with serious repercussions to the wider regional order. This reality has often been overlooked, or not entirely recognized, as analysts and policy makers considered the issue to be isolated in, and confined to, the mountains of Kurdistan. Many tended to consider the Kurdish issue as too marginal to have an impact on wider regional stability. But, it is instructive to examine a recent episode of Iraqi Kurdish history to illustrate the inaccuracy of this approach: the Baath regime unwilling to concede Kurdish demands for autonomy

¹ Wilson, Sir Arnold T., Mesopotamia 1917-1920, A Clash of Loyalties, Volume II, Oxford University Press, London, 1931, p. 102.

and self-rule, and unable to crush the Kurdish insurgency militarily, found itself obliged to offer Iran significant territorial concessions at Algiers in 1975 in return for ending Iranian assistance to the Kurdish movement. Saddam Hussein's decision to abrogate the Algiers's accord was a prelude to the devastating 8 year war between Iran and Iraq, which was in itself setting the stage for Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. The recent conflict in the gulf, could be traced, in no small part, to repercussions of the Kurdish national issue in Iraq.

The Kurds have been, and remain, a potent source of regional conflict. They have the further distinction of being the one serious source of conflict in the Middle East that the foreign ministries of the major powers, and many independent analysts as well, have long refused to deal with or even to acknowledge. For decades, diplomats have toiled ceaselessly over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Whilst numerous other regional disputes commanded attention of policy makers, the Kurds, however, have been ignored or dismissed, looked upon either as a nuisance, or a containable conflict, but rarely as a problem requiring attention. Governments have had a Kurdish policy only when they sought to achieve some strategic gain by manipulating the Kurds to serve their own ends, which were invariably secret and unavowable. Otherwise, the common reaction has been to wish them away.

In consequence, today the Kurdish problem has reached the point where it can be ignored only at the risk of major upheaval. No stable regional order can be attained without due consideration being given to Kurdish aspirations and Kurdish security concerns. As a means to illustrating and understanding these aspirations and security concerns, recent developments in Iraqi Kurdistan will be focused on:

The advent of the Baath government and its takeover by

Saddam Hussein marked a turning point in relations between the Kurds and the Arab government in Baghdad. The Baath regime sought to destroy the Kurdish national identity by all means, and began escalating a program to transfers of Arabs into the Kurdish region. Little by little these transfers assumed the shape of a deliberate Iraqi government policy aimed at expelling Kurds and establishing Arab colonies in the Kurdish heartland. After the defeat of the 1974-1975 Kurdish uprising came the first large scale destruction of Kurdish villages, the first mass exiling of Kurds and the first mass killings. In the early 1980s, when his war against Iran began to go badly for him, Saddam Hussein sought to conciliate the Kurds. But once he regained the upper hand he struck out against them in a frenzy of destruction and killing unlike anything perpetrated by any earlier Iraqi government. Iraqi army poison gas attacks on Kurdish towns and villages during 1987 and 1988 are conservatively estimated to have taken some ten thousand lives. During the infamous "Anfal" campaign of those same years, and in 1989, the Iraqi army erased some four thousand Kurdish villages from the map. Over a half a million Kurds were expelled into so-called "new towns", that were in reality strategic hamlets enabled the regime to maintain a tight watch over the population.

In the light of all this, it should be considered little wonder that the Kurds of Iraq rose in revolt the moment Saddam Hussein's army was defeated in Kuwait in February 1991; that some two million Kurds fled in panic into the mountains, and to Turkey and to Iran, when the Iraqi dictator turned what remained of his forces against them; or that the Kurds have now set up their own regional self-governing administration in the area they control in northern Iraq.

Despite the allied intervention in the spring of 1991 and the consequent stabilization of the situation in northern Iraq, the Baath regime continues to harass the Kurds and try

to push them out of their land. Some 300,000 Kurds, and also Turkomans, from Kirkuk have been expelled from their homes and now live as refugees in camps inside Kurdish controlled territory in Iraq. It has sponsored attacks on Kurdish villages, carried out terrorist bombings and murders in Erbil and other Kurdish towns and cities, sought to prevent international humanitarian assistance from reaching the Kurds, clamped an illegal embargo on the Kurdish administered region and massed an army of some two hundred thousand along its borders.

Kurdish Security Concerns

The first and most immediate security concern of the Kurds of Iraq is therefore never again to fall under rule of Saddam Hussein and his regime; and to be protected from them, so long as they remain in power.

Beyond this the Kurds seek a change in the patterns of behavior toward them by the major powers, who traditionally have regarded them as a destabilizing element and have refused to grant legitimacy to their grievances. It is hoped that with the end of the cold war, it will be possible for policy makers to evaluate and view Kurdish national issue in a more realistic manner uninhibited by considerations of super power rivalries.

The regional powers have often banded together to suppress Kurdish national aspirations, as in the pre-World War II Saadabad pact, the 1975 Algiers accord between Iraq and Iran and the hot pursuit agreement between Turkey and Iraq. Despite assurance to the Kurdish leadership by its participants, the recent tripartite meetings amongst the Foreign Ministers of Syria, Iran and Turkey is a cause of great concern and alarm in the Kurdish camp. Despite profound differences in character and outlook, regional powers have had

no difficulty to collaborate to confront the presumed "Kurdish threat." The main stream Kurdish leaderships are adamant in confining the domain of their movements to the boundaries of the states with which they live, but it is feared that this pattern of regional collaboration against the Kurds may ultimately lend support to calls by extremists who advocate a pan Kurdish strategy transcending present political boundaries.

Historically, two patterns of behavior have prevailed in regard to the Kurdish issue: to attempt to exploit it for perceived short term national gain, or to ignore it - in either case with little or no consideration given to the moral, human or political consequences.

The Iranian-American intervention of the 1970s, in which the Shah of Iran and the Nixon administration provided support to the Kurdish resistance during the 70s, is a prime example of the first of the two patterns. These Iranian and American actions were aimed not at resolving the Kurdish issue but only at exploiting it; the Shah wanted satisfaction of his territorial ambitions, and the US wanted to keep the Iraqi army busy at home and unable to intimidate moderate Arab states willing to make peace with Israel. In March 1975, after a year's fighting, Saddam Hussein made a deal with the Shah, Iran and the US cut off their aid to the Kurds, and the Kurdish rebellion collapsed. The Kurds suffered terribly, but the Iranians paid an even greater price for the Shah's perfidy a half a decade later when Saddam denounced the 1975 agreement and invaded their country.

The same pattern is to be found in the behavior of the Baghdad and Tehran governments during the Iran-Iraq war, when each supported Kurdish insurgencies inside the other's borders, solely in the aim of weakening the other party.

Some may object that the Kurds have been the too eager recipients of aid offered all too clearly in the aim of exploiting them. Today many Kurds would acknowledge that the objection has validity. But there must also be taken into account the oppression suffered by the Kurds under governments intent upon erasing their linguistic, cultural and ethnic identity; and the fact that, as the saying goes, a drowning man rarely has the luxury of scrutinizing the provenance of the life jacket that is thrown to him.

The second pattern - that of simply ignoring the Kurdish issue and tolerating the abuses perpetrated against the Kurds by the governments under which they live - has been the more common but in some instances also the more devastating. For decades the world stood silently by while regional governments oppressed and abused their Kurdish citizens. One instance stands out as particularly egregious. In the summer and fall of 1988, when the government of Iraq carried out its systematic program of destroying Kurdish towns and villages and transferring their inhabitants to concentration camp enclosures, the foreign ministries of the major powers, though well informed about what was happening, either said nothing or protested only very weakly. No steps were taken to penalize Iraq for its action which was clearly genocidal in nature and in stark violation of international law.

This second pattern finds its rationale in the fact that the Kurds are a minority in the states in which they live. Foreign Ministries have never been comfortable dealing with the question of minorities. In the traditional practice of diplomacy, the world was made up of sovereign states. What a state chose to do to the population that lived within its borders was its business and no one else's; and even if it was morally repugnant, other governments had to consider their broader political and economic interests. The principle of realpolitik prevailed.

Governments that oppressed and abused their Kurdish minorities traditionally invoked the principle of sovereignty to shield themselves from being called to account. To cite one example among many: in September 1988, the government of Iraq advanced the excuse of sovereignty to justify its refusal to agree to the sending of a United Nations team to investigate reports that it had used chemical weapons against its Kurdish population. Iraqi Defense Minister Adnan Khairallah commented that "the Kurds are Iraqis and it is an internal issue." There was, he declared, no justification for the UN or any other international party to infringe upon Iraq's sovereignty by independently investigating conditions in the Kurdish area.² Although the use of chemical weapons is barred by international law, the world community accepted this Iraqi refusal without protest. Further, no sanctions were levied against Iraq even after it was established beyond question that it had used chemical weapons against its Kurdish population.

If the Kurdish issue is to be prevented from becoming a major source of disruption and conflict in the Middle East in the decades to come, the two patterns described above must change drastically. Governments must recognize that attempts to exploit Kurdish grievances for short term and expedient political gain can only result in serious long term complications that will threaten the stability and prosperity of the entire region. Governments must also recognize that times have changed, and that sovereignty is no longer the measure of the world order. Since World War II a vast body of international law has grown up that prohibits states from denying to their ethnic minorities, as to their individual citizens, a broad array of basic rights and freedoms. What a government does to the people who live within its borders is

² Middle East Watch, Human Rights in Iraq, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 80-81.

no longer its business only; to the extent that it abuses them, it is everybody's business.

What This Means in Practice:

What this means in practice is that the Kurdish issue needs to be put on the world community's agenda, that the Kurds should no longer be treated as something unmentionable or the sole concern of the states in which they live. The world community has an obligation to share in the search for a solution that will offer the Kurds the opportunity to shed their unwanted role as a prime source of regional conflict and instability and become responsible citizens contributing to their region's progress and stability.

Generally speaking, there are two possible solutions for the Kurdish problem. One is to unite the Kurds into a single national state. The other is to seek to accommodate them, on terms compatible with their linguistic and cultural heritage and their fundamental human rights, within existing borders. The provisions of the treaty of Sevres of 1920 offered a framework for the first of these two solutions. For reasons explained earlier in this paper, these provisions were never given effect. The opportunity that existed in the two years following the end of World War I to resolve the Kurdish problem along nation state lines was lost.

No more than the first solution - that of the nation state - the second - that of accommodating the Kurds on terms compatible with their heritage and their fundamental human rights - has not been tried so far. It is urgent now that the effort be made.

The situation of the Kurds of Iraq is unique. The ferocious repression visited upon them by Saddam Hussein's Baath government have few parallels in modern history. The

upsurge of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, and the closing of Kurdish ranks that has come about in recent years, was in part the no doubt wholly unintended consequence of Saddam's policies. From the crucible of suffering inflicted upon them by Saddam there has arisen among the Kurds of Iraq a sense of national unity and purpose unique in their history. For the past two years the Kurds of Iraq have for the first time been free of Baghdad's yoke and able to begin to exercise the right of self-government promised them by the allies after World War I. In May of last year, the first free elections in the history of the Kurdish people - certified free and fair by independent international observers - were held in Iraqi Kurdistan. A parliament and a provisional executive were brought into being under a moderate, secular leadership. This democratic process in Iraqi Kurdistan could be the prelude for a wider solution for the political crisis in Iraq, and may be the catalyst to democratization of the whole of Iraq.

Being both secular and democratic, the Kurdish movement in Iraq is strategically placed to make a major contribution to stability in the region. Its democratic character sets an example for the other peoples of Iraq. In pursuit of its vision of a regional order based on democratic values and human rights, the Kurdish leadership has been seeking to play a constructive role in the politics of this region and to show that Kurdish aspirations need not be viewed as a threat. To this end the Kurdish leadership has cultivated relations with Turkish democracy and has been active in attempting to moderate the conduct of Turkish Kurdish movement and promoting better understanding between Ankara and Turkish Kurds.

The Kurds of Iraq have a contribution to make also to the stability of the Arab world. The Kurdish leadership is currently engaged in promoting a dialogue with Arab countries, in particular with the Gulf states. There is a common interest between Kuwait, for example, and the Kurds of Iraq to reshape

the political order in Iraq in such a way that it will minimize the possibility of dictators like Saddam Hussein gaining absolute power.

But to be able to make their contribution to regional stability, the Kurds of Iraq must first survive. The four million who live in the Kurdish self-governing region of northern Iraq are under internal blockade by the Baghdad government. The blockade, established in 1991, prevents the Kurds from acquiring gasoline and fuel for heating from Iraqi refineries as well as medicines and other supplies. Because there is no ready alternate source of refined petroleum products, the Iraqi blockade has caused great suffering, particularly during winter months. The effects of the blockade have been compounded by sabotage and terror actions carried out by Iraqi agents against international relief convoys bringing food, fuel, medicine and other necessities to the Kurdish territory. In December and January Saddam Hussein's agents blew up a number of trucks carrying US and UN humanitarian assistance to the Kurds. The Baghdad regime has also sent agents inside the Kurdish territory to carry out other acts of sabotage and terror.

In addition to the Iraqi blockade, the self-governing territory suffers under the United Nations embargo against Iraq. This embargo, which was meant to punish Saddam Hussein's regime for its seizure of Kuwait, prevents the Kurds from obtaining badly needed spare parts to and equipment to

rehabilitate industry and agriculture. It is a serious obstacle to rebuilding the economy of the Kurdish territory which has been ravaged by war and by the deliberate destruction, by the Baath regime, of over four thousand Kurdish towns and villages.

The biggest threat to the Kurdish territory, however, comes from the very large army that Saddam Hussein has massed along its border. Iraqi forces threatening the Kurdish territory currently number some two hundred thousand; they are equipped with tanks, artillery and other heavy weaponry and have air support. Were they to attack, the Kurdish forces, equipped with light weapons, may not be able to hold off an Iraqi assault for too long. Another mass flight of Kurdish families, in the millions, across the border into Turkey and Iran would ensue and the world community may be faced with a repeat of the April 1991 crisis that brought about allied intervention.

The deterrent to an Iraqi attack on the Kurdish territory is the allied task force in Turkey, known variously as Operation Provide Comfort or Operation Poised Hammer. So long as he knows that the Western allies are able and determined to oppose his moving into the Kurdish territory, Saddam Hussein is unlikely to risk renewed aggression. However, uncertainty over the future of the task force - whether the allies will maintain it and whether Ankara will continue to allow its stationing on Turkish soil - raises the risk of miscalculation by the Iraqi leader, a trait that has characterized his rule. To guard against this, the Western allies, and the government of Turkey, should make clear that the allied task force will be maintained so long as Saddam Hussein and his regime remain in power in Baghdad.

The challenge both to the major powers and to the regional governments is to cultivate the potential of the

Kurdish communities as a pillar for regional security order. The challenge is to comprehend the strategic role that the Kurds can play in promoting stability, democracy and respect for human rights. Failure to do so will inevitably perpetuate the cycle of violence and instability.

The Kurds want^{to} and can, ~~to~~ shed their traditional role as a source of conflict and instability in the Middle East. They want to become a partner to the democracies in the construction of a new, more secure and more just regional order.